

CHAPTER 5

"If the Prior and brothers see fit, you may have foundations in solitary places, or where you are given a site that is suitable and convenient for the observance proper to your Order."

This chapter is a later addition to the Rule under the mitigation by Pope Innocent III. As I have heard numerous times, it was added in order to allow Carmelites to accept a gift of land and/or house that often came with an invitation for the friars to begin a house. This way of acquiring property can also be a very mendicant way of living--not for the Order to decide on property to purchase, but to live and minister according to the gifts that are received. While this appears to be a very faith-filled way of responding to God's calls and the call of the needs of God's people, there is a very dangerous side to accepting land for foundations wherever they may be given, especially for an Order of hermit friars, moving from the seclusion of Mt. Carmel into European cities. The Rule accounts for this danger, but it can seem as though our practice has often ignored its warnings.

The Rule does not grant *carte blanche* to accept any and all houses and establish communities wherever they have been granted to the Order. The bottom half of the chapter is just as important, if not more important than the first. This mitigation specifies that the brothers may accept such property if it is a site "suitable and convenient for the observance proper to your order."

It does not direct the brothers to choose merely, "a site that is convenient for living," but one "that is convenient for the observance proper to your order." Not all places and ministries are suitable to the contemplative and austere characteristics of the Rule. The primary concern, as I read this text, is not to accept a site wherever it has been given, but those where we are able to maintain our identity and the Way of life prescribed by the Rule itself. The site must be suitable for Carmelite life, that is, it should not be in a 'wilderness' area that constantly fights against our Way of living, or forces us to adapt, or abandon the values central to our Carmelite identity. What these values may be is a question for deep discussion, but that they should be protected is not. The Rule clearly tells us to be discerning in where we accept houses and establish communities, not according to the needs of a particular area, or to the Church, nor to what is convenient for a lifestyle that we may have become accustomed to, but the primary factor that is raised above all others, is the effect of the ministry and area on our ability to live our Way of life.

Is this a question that we ask when considering invitations to new ministries? Are the demands of the life of a parish pastor, or high school president/principle compatible with the communal and contemplative life of a Carmelite friar? Are full-time salaried positions with

modern benefits compatible with a life of poverty that renounces ownership? Are large cities convenient for a life of simplicity and solitude?

It seems to me that there are no strict answers which apply to every situation, and that there is a reason why God moved the Carmelite way of life from the desert wadi into the landscape of cities and rural populations, but perhaps the Rule is telling us to be more courageous in passing on what may appear to be immediate needs of the Church, to give our first attention to the "observance proper to (our) order," and then allow our brothers to engage in ministries so long as they do not interfere our first obligations.

CHAPTER 5: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE

Accept places that are “suitable and convenient” to the observation of your Christian faith and Way of Life.



Each of us, regardless of what our goals may be, what we want to get out of life, or what we may want to accomplish, needs to be attentive to our environment, to the people with whom we spend our time, the activities we spend our time doing, and whatever other influences that surround us. At its core, this chapter of the Rule is telling us nothing more than this: that we be attentive to these things that surround us and judge them according to how they influence and affect the life in Christ that we desire to live.

The first thing that we think about when considering places that are “suitable and convenient” to the observation of our Christian faith is the place where we live. Many of us, it must be recognized, do not have as much freedom to actually choose where we live as we, or others seem to often think. Whether it is a commitment to a job, the closeness of our family, our economic situation or even the cultural environment that we enjoy, one can’t simply say that we should all find a good house that is located in a good neighborhood and only live in places surrounded by other Christians and which offer quietness, silence and the presence of nature that support this Carmelite Way of Life. It is simply not practical for families, priests and others living outside of the Order to hold the same standard of accepting “suitable” places which we should expect from the Order itself. We also know that a life lived in allegiance to Christ is not reserved to those with the financial resources to pick and choose exactly where they want to live, or who are fortunate enough to be born in such a place. Christ is found in every neighborhood; in the cities, in suburbia and across rural America; in high-rise apartment complexes, student dormitories and isolated farmhouses; He is found in homeless camps, in ghettos, ganglands, in the shacks of Appalachia and even in the penthouses of Manhattan and mansions of Beverly Hills. What we should bear in mind are two things.

First, if we have the opportunity—that we are *offered* a different place to live, we should carefully consider our commitments to Christ and desire for a Way of Life, and choose our new home accordingly. The second, is to be aware of our present situation and environment, knowing that where we live, our neighbors and the culture of those around us, are an ever present pressures, sometimes struggle, or even assistance in living a chosen way of life.

Beginning with the earliest days of the church, in the writings of the disciples of the Apostles, the community spoke often about spiritual food for the young and sick, and food for the mature; Paul wrote about being fed milk in the beginning of his Christian life, and then maturing to the nourishment of meat. In one place, he encourages the Corinthians to separate themselves from those who cheat and act abusively (I Cor 5:11), Christ himself warned the disciples to ignore anyone who did not listen to them, treating them as gentiles and tax collectors and leaving them out of the Kingdom (Mt 18:17); and both instruct the church to cut off anyone who is not obedient to the law (Mt 18:16, I Cor 5:9, 2 Th 3:14). Yet we know that we have also been told to forgive our brothers and sisters as often as they may ask for forgiveness, even up to 77 times; we have been missioned to go and preach the Gospel to all of the nations and to all people; and that the fallen Samaritan is our neighbor. What is happening here? Why has Christ given us such obviously contradictory directions?

For centuries, the church recognized a basic human condition and need, that in the beginning of things, when we are beginning our life in Christ, and at other times when we are vulnerable, we draw from the example, strength and support of those who surround us. One of the reasons for such high recidivism rates is that after leaving prison, many people have nowhere to go except to their old homes, families and neighborhoods. While they may begin with truly good intentions and authentic desire to lead a good life, the pressures surrounding them are simply too much for the soul to stand against. The same can be said for many drug addicts and recovering alcoholics. Who would not think it foolish for a man, on his second day of sobriety, to meet his friend in a bar.

In the beginning, when we are new to this Way of Life, and at times when we are weak, we need the comfortable and sure surrounding and the nourishment of infants. Later, with the strength of the Spirit also behind us, that we have grown stronger, more knowledgeable, and matured, then we can eat with the *tax collectors and sinners*, we can offer forgiveness without feeling such anger or frustration, and we truly bear the strength necessary to turn the other cheek or offer the only coat that we possess. The message from our first generations is that these are not contradictory commands, but instruction along the way and recognition of this same aspect of our nature that St. Albert saw: we need places which are *suitable and convenient to our avowed purpose*. We acknowledge that living in the Back of the Yards in Chicago will encourage one toward a life of violence and drug use; while living in a gated community will also encourage one to be

exclusive and to acquire material wealth; an apartment complex or college dormitory may make it difficult to cultivate silence. Be attentive and adapt your life to the place where you live and as much as you are reasonably able, choose places that support your avowed Way of Life.

If our home is the first place we may think of, then a second place is the parish to which we belong. If you are in a city where there are several parishes from which to choose, visit several and choose the parish which is nourishing and most supportive of your faith in Christ. If, however, as many of us live in areas without an option of parishes, recognize and be attentive to the ways in which it affects your way of life. By knowing and being aware of these influences, it is far easier to resist those negative things and to embrace and enhance the positive influences. Be attentive and choose, whenever possible, those places that are *suitable and convenient*, those which encourage, nourish and help your life in prayer to grow. Also, choose places for prayer accordingly, and other places you visit, including where you may travel for vacation.

Another thing that may catch our attention is that we are to find such places that are *suitable* to our *avowed purpose*. If we are comparing our situation to those in the Order, then we must also consider our *avowed purpose*, and those which are good. For parents, we may choose a place that is suitable for raising a family; for someone committed to mission work and serving the poor, the Back of the Yards in Chicago, or the inner city may be the best and most suitable place—no one would argue that to be homeless on the streets of Calcutta was the place *suitable and convenient* for Mother Teresa's avowed purpose. Be attentive and remember that your avowed purpose, in so much as you have adopted and desire this Way of Life, does not mean that you abandon all other things, but should be in union with and complimentary to your station in life and in putting your allegiance to Christ first,.

Lastly, we would consider also that places means far more than the physical locations where we live and worship. From the fourth century, we have a document called the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*. In this document, which describes the initiation ceremonies of the Church in Rome, there is a list of professions that Christians are prohibited from holding: "If someone is a sculptor or a painter, let them be taught not to make idols. Either let them cease or let them be rejected. If someone is an actor or does shows in the theater, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected..." The list continues to include certain public officials, one who wants to become a soldier, astrologers, diviners and even includes an admonition that one who teaches children should cease. What this list tells us is not that it is immoral for a person to be a teacher, a soldier, or to hold certain public offices, but that the Church recognized that there are certain professions and kinds of work that by their very nature, require one to take actions that are intrinsically opposed to the life of a Christian. One could not continue teaching children because in Rome, one would have been required to teach the virtues of the Roman gods and prepare children to burn incense

and worship the Roman gods; To be an artist or sculptor would have required one to make images of the Roman idols; To become a soldier would have meant to have sworn loyalty to the emperor as a god and to consign one's self to following orders that would surely have included the killing of innocents and other duties antithetical to Christ. Certain public offices also would have required one to enforce or even commit acts contradictory to one's vows to Christ and his church. Similarly today, there are professions which may require one to act in unchristian ways, and push us in ways that contradict our chosen Way of Life. If one is a county clerk which requires one to validate marriage certificates, it would be inherently impossible to both faithfully fulfill one's responsibilities to the laws acknowledging same-sex marriage and to the Church's teaching of marriage between a man and a woman. In a more obscure way, holding a position in advertising may require one to tempt others to buy things which they do not need, or are not a real benefit to their life; being a successful investment manager may push a person toward greed and the desire for increasing wealth; even teaching at a public school, depending on the particular school district, may require one to teach beliefs, values and a history that undermines the values of a Christian faith. In recent years, companies have instituted requirements regarding the use of preferred pronouns and support of optional genders. That something is done because it is our job does not erase its effects on our soul and life outside of the workplace.

To accept *places* that are *suitable and convenient* does not refer only to physical places, but also means that we give attention to, and whenever possible, accept jobs and professions that are also suitable, convenient and encouraging of our Christian faith and chosen Way of Life. In addition to jobs and the various places where we live and spend our time, we may also consider the people who we call friends and spend our time with, the hobbies that we enjoy, and truly every facet of our life. That we accept only those things which help us in this life in allegiance with Christ and reject those which lead us in a different way.

Above all, and most importantly, we must remember this: what is suitable and convenient does not mean what is good and comfortable to me. If I have given my life to Christ and to the service of God's people, then what is suitable may be a job as a counselor for alcoholics, a cook at a restaurant, it may be to take the night shift at a warehouse in order to provide for my spouse and children, it may be to remain at a parish where the homilies are truly boring so that I become more attentive to the other aspects of Mass—for Mother Teresa, the life of convenience to her avowed life was to become homeless, live on the streets and begin teaching the untouchable children of the ghettos.

Whatever your service to Christ may be, the life of faith and in allegiance to him, accept all that is *suitable and convenient* to the observation of your faith and leads you on your chosen Way of Life.

Designate and maintain a solitary place.

God said to Elijah, “Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will be passing by . . .” and when he heard a tiny whispering sound, “Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance to the cave.”

If there is one thing that we can say is unique to the Carmelite way of life and essential to this particular way of life in allegiance to Christ, it is the practice and time spent in solitude and silence. It is not, as some may be confused and believe, the meditative silence we seek in order to calm the soul and give respite from an increasingly loud and noisy world; nor is it merely an inner calm and inner silence that we seek while commuting on the train each morning, surrounded by the din of factory machinery or the bustle of demanding customers and clients; rather, it is in the silence and intimacy of solitude that we find God, that we come face-to-face with our Creator without distraction and we stand before Him as a dear friend, His attention raptured on us, just as we are enraptured by Him; it was in that very moment as Elijah hid in the cave that he encountered the One he loved, that he heard the tiny whisper of his lover’s call, once drowned by the sound of a roaring wind, buried under the rumble of an earthquake and overwhelmed by raging fire. In the stillness, the loneliness--a truly holy loneliness--and solitude that was free from all other voices, from distractions and chatter of day-to-day concerns, Elijah’s ears were free to hear and listen to no other but the LORD alone. And so, at the sound of his lover’s call, he approached to the mouth of the cave with timidity and gentleness.

It was not fear that hid his face and inspired Elijah to raise his cloak--if we recall, he had already passed the high winds, the earthquake and fire without the slightest tremble. This was the prophet’s first meeting with the LORD. He had prayed and spoken, and been zealous in fulfilling all of the LORD’s commands, but not yet had they met face-to-face, not yet had he stood so barren and open before the one he loved. As a bride may hide behind her hands on her wedding night, or a groom timidly reach his hand forward that first time, Elijah hid his face, shielding his eyes from his beloved, from the overwhelming intimacy that threatens to drown our soul yet gives us great life.

Life in Carmel has always sought to imitate and share in the experience of Elijah. From the very beginning, it is why the first monks gathered around the *Spring of Elijah*--there was already a small group of eastern hermits gathered around his cave--why they took up residence in solitary caves far from the noise and distractions of the holy city, it is why they dedicated their lives to prayer and silence, and why centuries later, as they moved into cities and new regions, they continued to call their homes *monasteries*.

It is true that there are an infinite number of ways that God presents Himself to us; that He dwells in every quarter of the globe and even in the most vile and loudest of places imaginable; that He does not exist alone in the silence and solitude, but is in the work of healing others, in our liturgical prayers, in the studying of His Word, the preaching and evangelization of the Gospel, in missionary work to the poorer regions, in the work of social justice, in the care of the impoverished and the dying, in the teaching of school children, in the raising of a family and the sacrifice of service to others; God is in the richness of nature and the congestion of cities; He exists everywhere and will reveal Himself in whatever way we may either see Him most clearly or in the ways that He needs for us to see according to the Good of His Kingdom. That God exists in such places, and why humanity has discovered Him here, is why Albert recognized that “many and varied are the ways,” and that there are many orders with many charisms and ways in living a life in allegiance to Christ--the Carmelite way is one among them.

Yet, it is also true that while God exists everywhere, we are not capable of seeing Him everywhere and equally. Just as it may be harder for us to have a conversation with a good friend in a crowded room, or in the middle of a rock concert, or while we are shopping for things, or having to focus our attention at our job, or carryout any one of our daily chores in life, it is harder for us to have that intimate conversation with God in the midst of the very same things. And truly, it is this friendship that we are seeking: that Elijah approached as with a lover and dear friend. God wants to share and be with us as such a dear friend. It is only in the silence and solitude that we can experience God in these particular and certain ways. Just as it is easy for us to know that time alone together is essential to any relationship: with our spouse, our children, our family and our friends, so too is this time alone, which is in solitude, essential to our relationship with Christ and our Lord. It is in solitude that we are attuned more to the sound of the Spirit and Wisdom, that we may also be more attentive and hear Her more often throughout the rest of day; it is in solitude that we grow in friendship and experience more intimate love; and it is in solitude that we receive the healing Grace of His presence and Spirit. We are rejuvenated in the spirit, receiving healing for whatever may ail our spirit, we receive from His energizing bounty and just as Elijah grew in strength and was prepared for a new journey and mission, so to does anyone who stands for any time in such presence with God, reap from the fruit of His Spirit and Grace.

Designate a time and place for daily solitude. Anyone, regardless of your station or condition in life, can do this, even if it is for a short time and may be difficult to find such a reserved place. I read of the story of a priest, held in the Russian gulags for over 20 years, who intentionally seized upon every moment of solitude he could find--even if it was for 10 seconds when he was the first to sit at the table for lunch, or if he had a moment of privacy in the latrine. It is advantageous, if

at all possible, that you have times and places that remain regular and the same. This routine is part of our human psyche, that we benefit from such consistency, but even more importantly, that we have taken the step to reserve such time and places for our Lord; that we have set them aside for Him and for thoughts of Him alone. This reservation is another dimension of solitude that we may not often think about.

In addition to physical solitude, there is a solitude, or freedom of distraction from our thoughts. Being in one's office, it is easier to think of things about work and appointments that may be coming later in the day; in our bedrooms we may be distracted by an overflowing laundry hamper, or our make-up table, or thoughts of cutting our time short and going to bed. If possible, find a place that helps to inspire thoughts of God alone, or a place where you are able to clear your mind from any thoughts or distractions. Spend your time, perhaps five minutes in the beginning, that is at least twice each day, if possible, and increase this time to a half-hour, or even an hour each time as it is possible and not unduly burdensome to your life and commitments to others--we should not use the excuse of prayer to bring harm or neglect the needs of others. If you are a parent, you may be able to consider inviting and sharing time in silence with your child, possibly for a short time at the dinner table, or immediately prior to bed, knowing what is suitable to their age and that only a minute, or even just 10 seconds, may be appropriate. Be also attentive to other times and stresses, that whenever your spirit is in need, seek God in the silence. You will surely find that if you do this, or even if you ignore this need for even a short time, that the rest of this life hinges on and is nourished by such silence.